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Bell, Erin; Gray, Ann

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# History on television

## *Charisma, narrative and knowledge*

**Erin Bell**

**Ann Gray**

*University of Lincoln*

**ABSTRACT** What appears on screen as 'TV history' is limited by a number of possible factors; technological, financial and cultural. This article considers some of these limitations, as little is known about the processes whereby representations of the past are mediated, shaped and transformed through television. This raises pertinent questions about the construction, distribution and marketing of narratives about national and other pasts.

Using oral history techniques in the research, this article seeks insights from historians involved in history programming; from this rich seam of information it focuses on two themes: the respondents' own representation on camera as historians, and their views on the style and modes of address of TV presenter-historians. This is analysed with reference to notions of charismatic television personalities and dominant narrative structures, drawing on, among others, Hayden White. It is suggested that these modes of address and televisual forms offer the viewer particular relationships to knowledge and ways of knowing.

**KEYWORDS** *identity, history, narrative, oral history, television*

**During the 1990s**, in Britain as elsewhere in Europe, the production and broadcasting of history programming made for television increased exponentially. This has prompted us to ask how we get the kinds of television that we do, and, drawing on the work of the postmodernist historian Hayden White in particular, which narrative techniques are used, by whom and about whom. To answer this we intend to address the contexts of production and attempt to relate these to different kinds of history programming on television. Production studies are rather thin on the ground in television scholarship, but our research first looks at the role that academic historians play in programme ideas and execution. Arguably, they can be seen as the originators of work which develops historical knowledge, some of which is considered suitable for development into television programming. Very little is known about the processes whereby an expert body of knowledge is mediated, shaped and transformed through

television for mass audiences. In the case of history and representations of the past, this raises pressing and pertinent questions about how narratives about national and other pasts are constructed, distributed and marketed through television. Further, it raises the question of how TV history programmes fit into the broader history of British TV, especially when, as we shall consider, several early TV historians actively campaigned for independent television as part of their role as public intellectuals.

We hope that our research will provide a history of history programming on television, employing an innovative method that uses interviews to unpack discourses of production within a particular genre. The first phase of our interdisciplinary research project (see the introduction to this issue for further details) involves a pilot study, which seeks the opinions and experiences of historians working in British universities who are involved in TV history programmes. Between October 2004 and October 2005 we carried out open-ended interviews of around two hours' duration each, with a sample group of nine historians. We plan to interview more historians and have begun to interview TV producers. By using this qualitative and exploratory method, we are seeking to elucidate the ways in which scholars working on different aspects of TV history account for and interpret their various experiences. Stuart Davies and Crispin Paine have done similar research with British museum professionals; in both projects, attitudes and ideas about popular representations of the past have been garnered through interviews from 'insiders'. As Davies and Paine comment, 'professions are knowledge-based occupations and so it is legitimate to examine what knowledge they have, how they use it and what are their professional preoccupations' (Davies and Paine, 2004: 55). However, there are obviously further methodological issues relating to how the 'producers' of television, both TV executives and other professionals such as historians, remember – or misremember – the history of the programmes on which they have worked. However, their accounts are significant, and highlight both the benefits and pitfalls of using this research method for those interested in the ways in which the history of television itself is written and researched. For example, although the historians interviewed are experts in their specific fields, in most cases this did not include the history of television, and so analysis of their understanding and description of the wider processes in which they have been engaged must bear this in mind. However, by considering what these 'outsiders' perceive to be going on, we receive additional insights into TV history and history on TV: some, for example, were active in other areas of what might be described as 'public history', such as museology, and brought this to their understanding of the making of history programming.

Indeed, all of those interviewed provided their own interpretations, in narrative form, of the process of making television history. None of the interviewees were 'big name' historians commanding millions of pounds



per series, and none had published detailed accounts of their experiences on set. As few of the historians had made any previous attempt to prepare an account of their experiences before they received the list of interview questions a few days in advance, these interviews were not only oral history but also may be termed oral historiography, as they allowed professional historians to think through the different levels of their experiences and use their insights to make sense of what had happened at a historiographical level. Indeed, many of their comments suggest that, like Margaret Somers (1994), they had identified the limited nature of representations available, ostensibly to those making history programming, but more importantly, to those watching television history.

The development of scholarship around narrative parallels scholarship on TV history, as discussed in the introduction to this issue. Although during the 1960s and 1970s many historians, particularly those of the *Annales* school, rejected narrative as a representational form (White, 1973, 1987), and some continue to criticize television history programmes for what they perceive to be an over-reliance on narrative rather than social process (for example, Hunt, 2006), scholars in other disciplines have sought to deal with narrative more positively, enabling it to be used as a tool to understand the social world (Somers, 1994). Indeed, this led Hayden White to comment that

the topic of narrative has been the subject of extraordinarily intense debate. Viewed from one perspective, this is surprising ... Narration is a manner of speaking as universal as language itself, and narrative is a mode of verbal representation so seemingly natural to human consciousness that to suggest that it is a problem might well appear pedantic. (1987: 26)

White specifically aims to consider narrative discourse and historical representation, raising a point of great significance to historiography, and particularly to television history, when he asks whether events and processes which do not easily lend themselves to a straightforward narrative account are therefore 'unhistorical', or whether 'the possibility of representing them in a nonnarrative mode of discourse' instead indicates 'a limitation of the narrative mode and even a prejudice regarding what could be said to have a history?' (White, 1987: 28). Sonja de Leeuw has engaged with this difficult problem recently, concluding that White's argument that 'modernist anti-narration techniques, such as fragmentation, exploding the conventions of the traditional tale and splitting narrative functions, are the most appropriate techniques to represent the historical reality of our time with its "unnatural" (unprecedented) catastrophes' liberates the documentary maker from realistic documentary-making, with its 'narrative omniscience', in favour of 'representing the traumatic events of the 20th century in a manner that does not pretend to contain or define or control them' (de Leeuw, 2006: 79). Certainly, the TV historian Michael Wood, whose programmes are discussed at greater length later in this article,

recognizes the current emphasis on narrative in TV history and asserts that, in contrast, the method of *Annales* scholar Fernand Braudel

might be a rather interesting way of making TV history programmes. Braudel's books on the Mediterranean, on France and on nature of civilisation seem to be at the core of what the humanities are about: the big picture, the micro stories, the imaginative use of documents ... It would be interesting to see a talented programme maker and a gifted and imaginative historian combine to do something like the Roman Empire in a Braudelian way, showing the Mediterranean world through that period, instead of a narrative of what the Caesars got up to in their bathrooms. (Wood, 2005)

Evidently, not all TV historians are loathe to stray from the 'straight-forward' narrative pathway.

White's work encourages us to think of historiography, whether traditional or televisual, as being 'about arranging and telling stories, not about delivering objective truth', closely associated with Johnson's description of 'the formal pathway by which the historian's or author's agency, including political and moral values, enter the narrative' (Sobchack, 1996: 4; Johnson, 2001: 281).<sup>1</sup> Although White's early assertion (1973) that events may be manipulated through representation and narration may now be common knowledge, as Sobchack claims,<sup>2</sup> analysis of the different ways in which representation and narration are used in history on television is still of significance for the audience, who have few alternatives to the limited versions of history on offer on TV which rarely purport to be anything other than authoritative. Therefore, it is important to remember that social narratives, including those broadcast in the media, are not produced at will. If, as Somers asserts, the 'repertoire of available representations and stories' is limited, and predominant narratives are 'contested politically and will depend in large part on the distribution of power' (1994: 629–30), then the experiences of female historians are particularly pertinent to this analysis, and may explain in part their notable underrepresentation in history programming.

All of the historians interviewed had been involved in TV history at a variety of levels. Usually they had advised researchers over the telephone and appeared as a 'talking head' in the same or another programme. All of them had been involved in at least two programmes. Seven are male which, coincidentally, also reflects the gender imbalance among university historians in Britain, where, we estimate, only around a quarter are women.<sup>3</sup> Our respondents were aged between 30 and 60, and most worked at northern English universities, two of which were 'new' universities. We have been careful to safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of our respondents, and to ensure this we have removed references to programmes which might allow them to be identified. Although this may limit the extent to which we can make explicit statements about individual programmes, and the ways in which different TV channels



and production companies approach making history programmes and working with professional historians, we believe nonetheless that we have succeeded in identifying themes in history TV programming when a narrow focus on historians' accounts of specific programmes may have proved misleading. For the purposes of this article we have focused on two recurring themes from the interview material, which shed some light on the operations of television history. These are the respondents' own representation on camera as historians and their views on the style and modes of address of TV presenter-historians. This material is analysed with reference to notions of charismatic television personalities and dominant narrative structures, and suggests that these modes of address and televisual forms offer the viewer particular relationships to knowledge and ways of knowing.

As the introduction to this special issue outlined, since the 1970s much of the debate about television history has remained couched in terms of the medium's inability to do 'proper' history. However, our interdisciplinary research aims to go beyond this, considering, as several of our respondents did, the role of television in producing and disseminating knowledge about the past. Some historians and media professionals view television's primary role as that of entertainment, and consequently the pressures to produce watchable television which will attract a reasonably sized audience, often within limited budgets, militate against the kind of history programming of which many historians would approve. For example, one of the respondents, having highlighted factual errors in several programmes and his disillusionment with programme makers, said:

I wish that I could speak to a public audience and make them understand these things, but ... where production companies are chasing money ... they're not going to be willing to take the risk in doing things in a more sophisticated and complicated way. Instead we're going to get Simon Schama, standing up reciting his A-level notes. (Interview B)

This respondent described what he saw as the thwarted attempts of university historians to educate an audience through TV history. In contrast with these attempts, media professionals appear to favour strong presenter-historians, whom he sees as conduits for over-simplified narrative accounts of the past.

As this suggests, the professional norms of television producers have led to certain types of history programming being made which rely upon key elements, including on-camera presenters, linear narrative and accessible visual material. Again, this suggests that the medium itself imposes limitations on how and what kinds of history reach the screen. However, an increasing number of historians do recognize the value of this form of public communication in disseminating historical knowledge and are embracing the medium on its own terms. Predictably, one such champion is Simon Schama, historian and presenter of *A History of*



*Britain*, the 15-episode series broadcast in three parts from 2000 to 2002 by the BBC. Schama draws attention to TV history as a potentially more imaginative medium than printed history, and by drawing on the popular 19th-century Whig historian Thomas Macauley (see Judd, 2005), infers that it is of equal value:

If it has the courage of its own convictions, and reinvents its own way of visiting the past, not just struggling to translate the issues of printed history ... then it has a fighting chance ... of making a history which is not only 'received by the reason but burned into the imagination'. (Schama, 2004: 33)

The historian Justin Champion also speaks of the potential that television holds for history:

It can take you to the familiar spot of land, into the castles and cathedrals, through the country houses and fields, into the bedrooms and private places ... Portraits, tapestries, skulls, coins, statues, all speak of the dead who once were. (Champion, 2003: 153)

Another TV presenter-historian, Tristram Hunt, criticizes those of his fellow historians who are

often willing to celebrate the lost customs of oral history and traditions of storytelling [but] are unwilling to accept a modern variant ... Our society is telling stories about ourselves to ourselves – a concept which is perhaps more easily understandable to sociologists and anthropologists than historians. (Hunt, 2004: 90)

One of the older respondents reflected upon the potential of contemporary television to fulfil his desire earlier in his career to be involved in history outside the academy, saying that he

always had a sense as a young academic that I would like to make a general impact ... but I always thought of that in terms of books, a pretty old-fashioned traditional outlook ... The media itself has changed so that you're able to reach a much broader audience, even if it's only a small TV audience. (Interview A)

Taking our cue from this recently re-energized debate, arguably inspired by the expansion of history programming, our research is an attempt to go beyond notions of 'good' or 'bad' television history. To paraphrase John Corner, we hope that this research may make 'valuable progress towards a more comprehensive sense of what television's role in the circulation of contemporary knowledge, "bad" or "good", really is' (Corner, 1999: 115).

## **Presenting history**

In a recent article, Simon Schama refers to A.J.P. Taylor as the 'grand-daddy of all television historians' (2004: 24). Indeed, Taylor, an Oxford University-based professor of modern history, has become the archetypal



presenter-historian. In the inaugural BBC History Lecture,<sup>4</sup> Schama links Taylor's style to history as a kind of civic oration, akin to the Greek performative art of storytelling. Jeremy Isaacs, series executive producer of Thames Television's *The World at War* (1974) and former controller of Channel 4, describes how Taylor

stood alone in the studio and talked to camera. Without a prop or a note, without a hesitation or a syllable out of place, Taylor gave a dazzling demonstration of his lecture technique ... just the historian, epigrammatic, provoking, compelling. (Isaacs, 2004: 37)

Indeed, at the time Taylor was described as 'the only lecturer to face the cameras for half an hour without visual aids' (Taylor, 1967[1963]: 1). One of the respondents echoed these views:

A.J.P. Taylor ... was standing up there, and telling you his view, he wasn't encouraging you to debate it, just he was requiring a bit more brainpower to follow what he was saying, because there were no, kind of, maps and cameras floating around in the background. (Interview B)

Ian Kershaw goes further by confirming Taylor's legacy to contemporary television history:

[T]he Schamas, Starkeys and Fergusons, follow in Taylor's footsteps and have inherited the mantle of those who believed long ago that the historian's job was to use their skills and knowledge to bring big and important historical themes to the attention of a mass audience. (2004: 120)

What has been eradicated systematically from these memories of Taylor's programmes is the content. Through his pedagogic style he challenged his audience and encouraged them to think by basing his narratives on questions such as 'How do wars begin?' (*How Wars Begin*; BBC, 1977). And surprisingly perhaps, given the era and his status, his lecturing style is not at all patronising. Compare this to episode 8 of *A History of Britain*, 'The British Wars', in which 'Schama tells of the brutal war that tore the country in half',<sup>5</sup> acting as a conduit for historical truth. Although Jerry Kuehl (2005[1976]) reminded historians that TV audiences do not consist of undergraduates, some of Taylor's lectures were delivered initially at Oxford before being 'a little shortened in the third programme of the BBC ... The text represents what I said a little more coherently; but still as lectures' (Taylor, 1969[1957]: 9). Indeed, the BBC producer John Irwin had suggested originally that Taylor present some of his Oxford lectures to a wider television audience.

Furthermore, and unlike most presenter-historians in the late 1990s and the early 21st century, Taylor was openly critical of the BBC and championed the cause for independent television, becoming vice-president of the Popular Television Association in the mid-1950s, a body campaigning for the introduction of commercial television (Oliver, 2003–6). Having recorded several series for both ITV and the BBC from 1957 onwards, this



criticism led in part to a nine-year hiatus which ended in the mid-1970s when producer Edward Mirzoeff invited Taylor to return to the BBC. Upon his return Taylor's work included *How Wars Begin* (1977) and its companion, Taylor's final series, *How Wars End* (Channel 4, 1985). Thus, the memory of the style has overshadowed the content of Taylor's series, and his actions outside the TV studio, for both media professionals and historians. In the cases of both Taylor and Kenneth Clark, the history of TV historians has been largely obscured; unsurprisingly, when TV executives provide accounts of the earliest era of TV history they underplay such issues, and in so doing, limit the possibility for comparison with more recent presenter-historians such as Schama, who have become involved also with broader issues such as school history lessons (BBC News, 2002).

A much more paternalistic style was adopted by Kenneth Clark, whom Ian Kershaw leaves out of his list of 'mantle bearers'. Clark was an important and significant presenter-historian, whose series *Civilisation: A Personal View by Lord Clark* was also a groundbreaking programme. The series was transmitted between February and May 1969 on BBC Two, the BBC's second channel. Clark was invited by David Attenborough, then controller of the fledgling channel, to front this innovative 13-part series, the first of its kind in colour.<sup>6</sup> Clark had been a successful director of the National Gallery during the war, had written scholarly books on art and, importantly, was interested in television. Indeed, a decade after Taylor, Clark supported independent television and was the first chair of the Independent Television Authority, and had made programmes for British commercial television. Although clearly Clark is addressing the audience through his pieces to camera, his tone is one of a patronizing élitism, epitomized in his introduction to the first programme where he asks: 'But what is civilisation?' He answers his own question with: 'I can't define it in abstract terms [pause] yet. But I think I can recognise it when I see it.' *Civilisation* ran over budget, causing Attenborough to schedule it twice in the week, halving the per hour costs. It was a huge success with the minority of colour television set owners. People held *Civilisation* parties, inviting less fortunate friends to view the programme. Attenborough was keen to sell it to US television but the networks were not interested at the time. No doubt using his contacts in the art world, Clark arranged screenings in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC and attracted large audiences.

Many series bear the adjective 'landmark' but arguably *Civilisation* is one that earns this description. Executives at the BBC immediately grasped the potential for this new genre of 12 or 13-part authored documentaries for which they coined the term 'sledge-hammers' (Attenborough, 2002: 214). Aubrey Singer, then head of the Science Department, commissioned *The Ascent of Man* with Jacob Bronowski (filmed in 1971 and 1972 and broadcast by the BBC in 1973), and others followed: Alastair Cooke on the American bicentennial; J.K. Galbraith on economics. Attenborough



himself resigned from his post as controller of BBC One and BBC Two in 1973 to make the natural history series *Life on Earth* (BBC, 1978). Clearly, then, the author-presenter is a figure central to this genre of programming and, arguably, one who has been resurrected in recent years in history television. Significantly, *A History of Britain* was originally intended to consist of 'worthy interviews intercut with location filming', but BBC One controller Michael Jackson's move to chief executive of Channel 4 meant that 'modern protocol demanded' a presenter, and in 1997 Schama was offered the role (Bremner, 2001: 64, 70). Further, at a recent conference, Janice Hadlow (2002) spoke of the desirable characteristics of presenters – or, as she put it, 'essayists of the TV world' – as the ability to entertain and engage, to demonstrate a certain element of showmanship and, above all, 'charisma for the camera'. This represents a move away from the explicitly paternalistic Clark and the 'charismatic academic' Taylor towards more charismatic presenter-historians who do not lecture the audience although they do address viewers, some of whom are arguably paternalistic, albeit by more subtle means.

Drawing on Richard Sennett's (1992) discussion of modern charisma, Espen Ytreberg suggests that 'the broadcasting "personality" exudes a personal charm that functions to soothe and reassure the audience' (2002: 765). Ytreberg is mainly discussing talk show hosts but notes that this kind of self-presentation is central to contemporary broadcasting across entertainment and popular fiction as well as in the genres of popular journalism: 'The audience is invited to believe in what the charismatic says because the charismatic communicates his or her personal belief in it so intensely' (2002: 765). The 'new generation' of historians appearing on British TV screens, and their styles of presentation, can be described collectively in this way. Indeed, one of these, Michael Wood, was described by the *Sunday Express* as 'the Indiana Jones of factual television'<sup>7</sup> while Simon Schama is 'the keeper of British history' and 'the man who made history sexy' (Billen, 2003: 14).

The issue of presentation is also key to the analysis of authority in TV history, and to some extent the respondents identified this. The historians commented on their physical representation on camera, with one stating that

television is actually a very intimate medium, because people see you often quite close up, and you're dropping into their front room ... You need ... to be dressed casually, I think, because otherwise it comes over as very formal. (Interview C)

Another described

such a close in shot on my head that I couldn't actually physically move around outside of the box the lens had created, [which] loses about half of what I do when I lecture because I'm not mobile, and I don't feel that I can put as much energy and dynamic into it. (Interview B)

It is difficult for a professional historian to maintain physical authority on screen unless they are allowed to do so by the producers; visual representation is crucial in this respect. Similarly, Jeanie Attie's review of the US documentary maker Ken Burns' *The Civil War* (PBS, 1990) refers to the limitations placed upon the historian Barbara Fields, who appears as a talking head, with footage of her 'carefully spliced, at times cutting her off in mid-thought', meaning that she appears 'neither physically comfortable nor intellectually buttressed by the wisdom contained in books', unlike another (male, non-historian) commentator (Attie, 1992: 98). It should come as no surprise then that presenter-historian-led productions, which rely on the charisma of the individual Schama or Starkey, create that same charisma by allowing the presenter to roam freely in front of the camera, rather than the far more common restrictions imposed on most historians.

The charismatic presenter does not arrive ready formed; their television persona often develops and builds over time. Schama's early five-part series *Landscape and Memory* (BBC Two, 1995) provides us with evidence of the presenter-historian who has yet to develop the confident style of the charismatic television personality. Clearly this is partly due to the programme's limited budget and consequent low production values. *Landscape and Memory* modestly combined film with the presenter speaking only from a studio set. His style and mode of presentation is formal and static. He wears a suit, although not a tie, and relies totally on his close-up speeches to camera to engage and persuade the audience.

Schama was persuaded to take on the *A History of Britain* project by Janice Hadlow, and in that series his presenting style has developed. He is less formal, the higher budget affords much location filming, he strides constantly into shot and speaks from historic sites, thereby enhancing his authority and presenter power. Quite clearly he has undergone something of a makeover in that he is now beardless, has been through a series of distinctively styled spectacles before wearing contact lenses, and seems to have benefited from some dentistry. The series was heavily hyped within the BBC's 'History 2000' project and marketed with a special issue of the *Radio Times*, the BBC's listings magazine, devoted to *A History of Britain*. It was presented as 'landmark' television but was sold around the 'personality' historian. The May 2001 cover of *BBC History Magazine*, launched in 2000 and also part of the 'History 2000' project, carried a photograph of Schama with the caption 'The History Man'. With this cover appearance, Schama became not only a fully-fledged charismatic presenter but, more importantly, a brand. Ian Bremner, producer of *A History of Britain*, has stated that the series was 'supposed to be a worthy successor to those classic series, *Civilisation* and *The Ascent of Man*' (2001: 64). Bremner further remarked that, in contrast to *A History of Britain*, such series 'underwhelm' the modern viewer (2001: 64), but in the wake



of the success of Schama's series they have been repackaged as DVDs and relaunched by the BBC.

While Ytreberg's arguments about the dominance of charisma in broadcasting are useful, they are insufficient for a detailed analysis of the author-presenters of history programming. Although they demonstrate on-screen presence and use their personal style to persuade and captivate, there is a further aspect to their appeal. That is the nature of their address. They are presented as knowledgeable, they are experts and, above all, they are intellectuals. They speak with eloquent fluency, enthusiasm and the certainty that their access to a fund of knowledge affords. Their performances are powerful in visual and literary terms. Add to this both beautifully shot and composed images and we have beguiling television. This power to beguile is afforded to the charismatic author-presenters and is a key component of their authority and legitimacy.

It could be argued that the notion of 'charisma' is applied more comfortably to the white male presenter, and this is certainly true of the new generation of historians. Interestingly, few of the male historians interviewed identified this as a 'problem area' in TV history, which may suggest the essentializing of white male experience here, as in other aspects of life (Gray, 1997). However, a female historian referred to the comment of one TV executive in the early 1990s, when responding to the idea of having a female presenter-historian: 'No one wants to be lectured at by a woman' (Interview J). Indeed, the same respondent asserted that:

There is still a deeply-seated, innate sexism within the television industry, and within the commentators on the television industry, and that must have a knock-on [effect] ... There are a couple of women in *Coast* [BBC Two, 2005] for instance, who are female historians, so I hope it will change. (Interview J)

In addition, the use of male voices in most series perpetuates 'a culturally constructed assumption that it is men who speak of the actual world and that they can do so in an authoritative manner' (Nichols, 2001: 55). Bettany Hughes, who authored and presented *The Spartans*, a Lion Television series first screened in 2002 on Channel 4, the second British commercial channel, is one of few female presenter-historians but her persona is depicted and marketed in terms of youth, glamour, travel and tourism. It is relevant to reiterate at this point that social narratives, including those broadcast in the media, are not produced at will, and that predominant narratives depend on the distribution of power. Perhaps this also goes some way to explaining the significant lack of female historians and historians of colour on British television screens; they cannot serve as authentic national storytellers when the stories told are often, although not always, those of European men. It is also pertinent to remember at this point White's assertion that historians record events in terms of the narrative genres familiar to them, and that arguably this applies also to television professionals seeking 'suitable' vehicles for different historians.



Figure 1 Presenter-historian Bettany Hughes on location (reproduced with kind permission of Lion TV and Bettany Hughes)

Presumably historians such as Hughes are not considered to be sufficiently authoritative to carry ‘grand narrative’ landmark history programming, such as *A History of Britain*, which Schama orders his audience to view as ‘an adventure in self-recognition’.<sup>8</sup> Further, while gender is clearly an issue here, like her male genre counterpart Michael Wood, Bettany Hughes does not have a university affiliation and therefore the legitimacy afforded to certain types of TV history programming by academia. Recently she has been compared unfavourably with Simon Schama and described incorrectly as having ‘no academic claims’ to legitimize her TV work, which undoubtedly stems from her representation on TV as a glamorous traveller. Indeed, the British archaeologist Angela Piccini (2004) has criticized Hughes’ *Seven Ages of Britain* (Channel 4, 2003) for ‘feminising’ the past; ‘it is veiled and mysterious, but might be available to us with the right chat-up line’. Such comments echo those of the historian Peter Novick a decade earlier, when he conflated ‘the language of bad history’ with ‘the language of women’ and was denounced by feminist scholars (Smith, 1996: 567). In a similar way to Hughes, Wood’s persona is presented as that of the explorer and adventurer, encapsulated in the description on the DVD of his series *In Search of Myths and Heroes* (Maya Vision International, BBC Two, 2005) as ‘an epic travelogue, a historical adventure and an exploration of some of humanity’s most enduring myths’. In both cases the subject-matter, period and geographical locations covered by their programmes can be seen as peripheral to current debates, which seek to link TV history to contemporary British identity.



The marketing of author-presenters is clearly critical to the construction of their public persona and the different ways in which they are publicized underlines their claims to authority and the direct relevance of their narratives to contemporary Britain. However, the authority created for historians such as Simon Schama via the media is refuted by many of their peers. For example, Schama's lack of expertise in the areas covered by *A History of Britain* was criticized by the respondents, as were any programmes fronted by a historian who did not have the relevant specialism. One described such a presenter as not having sufficient 'stature to carry it off ... he is not known for his expertise' (Interview F).

## Telling history

Clearly the author-presenters of TV history are central to the success of history programming not only in terms of ratings, but also in their support for the programmes' claims to legitimacy and credibility. However, the presenters themselves inhabit particular kinds of historical narrative. Issues relating to this were identified by some of the respondents. In general, the presenter-historian's TV persona was seen as distracting and, in the case of Simon Schama and David Starkey, linked to traditional forms of narrative history. As a respondent commented:

I find it pompous, and slightly authoritarian, and it's not a style of history that I feel comfortable with. (Interview D)

He continued by referring to the link between form and content in presenter-led programmes:

What is suggested by those programmes is that there's only one way of telling a story ... So the format determines it but the content goes along with that, because usually the kinds of historians that appear ... are highly opinionated ... [a]nd that you'd imagine would write old-style narrative history anyway. (Interview D)

Interestingly, this is a similar point to that made by Corner when he suggests that presenter commentary is 'literally, story *telling*' (2003: 99; emphasis in original). This describes the single presenter leading the audience through his personal account of the past, as emphasized by, for example, Clark and Schama, but which, because of the weight of the programme and the lack of alternative viewpoints, appears to speak the 'truth'. One respondent made a related comment about her opinion of the gendered nature of knowledge, commenting that men sometimes claim objectivity when this was not necessarily the case, and that this contrasts with women:

Women are more ready to go 'This is what I think, and I'm going to tell you that this is what I think, because this is the evidence and therefore this is the conclusion I have drawn', and I do think, and it's horrific to make such a

generalization, but I do think that men are happier to go 'This is how it is', and it's not, it's what they think. (Interview J)

If this is the case, and as most presenter-historians are men, much presenter-led TV history may follow this form. Initially it seemed feasible that the respondents would support only programmes aiming at 'truth', given their criticism of basic factual errors. Dirk Eitzen suggests that his fellow historians evaluate documentaries 'according to how well they do what academic historians are supposed to do' (Eitzen, 2005: 410) and that typical areas of criticism are factual inaccuracies and the type of questions posed and answered.

However, although they did not refer to them specifically, many of the respondents were aware of ideas relating to the analysis of documentary such as those offered by Bill Nichols. In his *Representing Reality* Nichols describes how the documentary's use of narrative and structure, using introductory dilemmas, building tension and ending with closure, infers a privileged access to reality and moral authority, which he called the 'discourse of sobriety' (Nichols, 1991: 107–8). Although this would suggest that historians would support the idea of the documentary offering a privileged access to reality, the parallel reliance in this particular form of historical programming upon both narrative and moral authority, carried by the author-presenter, was criticized. One respondent commented on what he perceived to be a return of TV history programming in the decade following 1995 to 'extraordinarily conventional storylines, whether it's particular monarchs, or histories of big global themes, or histories of nations' (Interview G). The presenter-led linear narrative form also suggests that, for example, both documentaries and history can be finite narratives. Furthermore, this can stimulate discussion that is only about the subject and not its mode of representation. But as Nichols asserted, 'what films have to say ... can never be separated from how they say it' (1991: xiii). Similarly, the same respondent highlighted the need to consider 'strategies of proof and exemplification, and what is used to stand for what' (Interview G); other respondents were critical of this kind of presenter-led, linear history programmes for the same reason.

In contrast to this perceived growth in more conservative TV history, many of the respondents called for the use of conflicting historical accounts, even within presenter-led series. One suggested that 'maybe there's a way you can have an argument that runs through, but have a diversity of voices that contribute to that, and might raise doubts' (Interview D). Indeed, the production team with which this respondent had worked were determined that the narrated, oral history-based programme that they were producing in the early 2000s, which allowed such a variety of voices, should be 'not like David Starkey' (Interview D). Corner too has noted the potential for the use of individuals' 'little stories' to create tension between the narrative of the documentary and 'the imaginative possibilities to emerge from the case-studies selected to illustrate it' (Corner, 2003: 99).



Unsurprisingly, then, most of the respondents rejected series such as *A History of Britain*, and one historian saw TV history as missing an opportunity to give 'marginalized groups' a voice, when instead

what you're actually doing is bringing in the good and the great like Simon Schama with lots of resources to tell a particular narrative history, that is actually his watered-down version of what the academics have come up with, but potential is there for something rather more radical. (Interview C)

Schama's frequent justification of presenter-led history is rebutted here and viewed as a symptom of lost opportunities in TV history programming.

## Watching history

Clearly, the audience for television histories forms a central aspect of understanding how notions of the past enter into the public domain, and the historians interviewed were extremely interested in this also. Such a response from professional educators is not surprising. They are keen for people to be more engaged by television history programming as a route into a broader interest in, and critical appreciation of, the past. Studies of television audiences have tended to focus on popular genres and we have found useful a body of work which investigates how people gain knowledge about the past from a range of sources. Those responsible for heritage attractions and museums are interested in how visitors 'may be rendered "mindful" so that they will be actively processing information and questioning what is going on' when visiting sites (Prentice et al., 1998: 5). Prentice and colleagues draw on Gianna Moscardo's work, influenced by educational psychology, which proposes that in any given situation, for example viewing television or visiting museums, people are mindful or mindless.<sup>9</sup> Mindfulness involves the recognition that 'there is not a single optimal perspective, but many possible perspectives on the same situation', which means that information can be processed and, importantly, questioned (Moscardo, 1996: 381). It also empowers the individual in that they display 'greater recall of and learning from, interpretation' (Moscardo, 1996: 384). Of course, this does depend on other factors relating to the individuals involved. As one respondent commented on his own experiences:

Museum visitors ... come with their own agenda, and they have their own reasons for visiting the museum ... and they can be very resistant indeed to any 'message' or 'narrative' or line that the museum wants to project ... [Further, the] programme maker is in a similar position to ... the person who pulls together an exhibition ... they have a line that they want to project ... but ... then you also have to think ... about the audience. (Interview C)

Mindlessness, in contrast, is a 'single-minded reliance on information without an active awareness of alternative perspectives' (Moscardo, 1996: 380).





Familiar and repetitive situations, such as traditional museum displays or perhaps certain kinds of TV history, may encourage this. Indeed, one respondent commented that a large number of people had said:

'I saw you on that programme, that was great, that subject's really interesting', but they can't actually remember what the argument was anyway. (Interview B)

This could apply to familiar generic programme formats, or to frequently revisited topics. So viewers, like museum visitors, may respond more positively to 'mindful' TV. This has the incidental effect of raising self-esteem (Moscardo, 1996), one of the 'feelgood' factors associated with much TV programming. As Corner has asserted, 'the giving of pleasure is the primary imperative of most television production' (1999: 93). Further, TV has 'extended the pleasures which gaining knowledge involves': Nichols refers to this as 'epistephilia', pleasure in knowing (Corner, 1999: 96).

TV has also popularized knowledge for mass audiences. As Anthony Giddens has identified, many specialist knowledges have been rearticulated as mass-mediated knowledge and been distributed far more widely (cited in Corner, 1999). But, as Corner notes, some have criticized the ways in which TV blurs 'different orders of knowledge' with 'little regard for the procedures of knowledge production and the protocols of evidence and argument' (1999: 97), which is reminiscent of many criticisms of TV history. Further, the available knowledge may be restricted in a variety of ways: this *may* be a function of bureaucratic control or a consequence of the commodification of TV (Corner, 1999), but the outcome is often a reliance on tried and tested topics and modes of delivery.

## Doing history

We will conclude by looking at two kinds of television history narrative, both within the 'tried and tested' author-presenter genre, and ask what versions of historiography they represent. In addition we consider what kinds of viewing positions, 'mindful' or 'mindless', are offered to the audience by the narrative structure and presenter style. This is not to say that we seek to define 'good' and 'bad' TV history, but that we consider which types of narrative and presenter style have more potential to allow space for 'mindful' engagement.

*A History of Britain* presents a fund of 'stories' about the past. Simon Schama argues that history is *about* telling stories and that he wanted to get across his passion for history through this series. Thus he puts together and often juxtaposes stories about people and events which present an overall narrative about 'who we are' and 'how we got here'. This linear narrative style is more likely to close the minds of viewers to any possible alternative view. It also refuses the notion that history is a process, especially one of interpretation, provisionality and differing perspectives. We



are given one perspective, albeit a self-confessed personal view, which through a range of visual and aural elements make truth claims which are carried powerfully through the texts. Although initially this seems to contrast with Schama's written works prior to the series, which were often hailed as examples of postmodern texts, Lisa Ford's contention that in them Schama highlighted his authorial role 'in ways which emphasize historical truth claims rather than the highly mediated nature of his texts' suggests that his position had changed surprisingly little when he became involved in *A History of Britain*. Although Schama may have rejected 'traditional historical metanarratives', he still imposed upon his works 'aesthetic and ideologically charged coherence': heroes and villains (Ford, 1999: 23). How viewers engage with history programming is a key point here, and merits further research; by looking at what spaces the texts offer for viewers to construct meaning, we can see the potential (or lack of it) for their engagement.

By contrast, Michael Wood's *In Search of Myths and Heroes* adopts a different narrative structure, that of discovery and quest. In terms of television genres this programme draws on picturesque and spectacular images from 'far off lands' reminiscent of holiday and travel programmes. However, in adopting the narrative of the quest, he – and by extension, the viewer – goes off in search of 'the truth' or the 'real' substance of mythology. This is an interesting example of author-presenter history programming in that it actually problematizes history, suggesting that, at the very least, history is open to interpretation and subject to a process of examination of evidence and the assessment of different accounts. Furthermore, in addition to consulting experts and original texts, Wood also asks people residing in the countries that he visits about their everyday knowledge of myths and stories. In the programme, therefore, we have a multiplicity of voices and a variety of viewpoints which invite the viewer to speculate and play with the ideas put forward. This may explain perhaps the positive opinion of Wood's work which was held by more than one respondent (Interviews B and J). Instead of history as grand narrative, work such as Wood's reflects his preference for other types of history, as discussed earlier, and may be seen to be history as detective story, demonstrating (albeit in a variety of 'exotic' locations) the processes of historical research and the various possible interpretations of the same sources.

The authored narrative, then, is a particularly closed way of telling history. Schama, like Clark before him, is at great pains to insist that this is a subjective view and that it is *a* history of Britain, not *the* history of Britain. When asked by Mark Lawson<sup>10</sup> how he would respond to criticisms of his single white male authoritative voice throughout the series, echoed by one of the respondents, his answer was revealing. First, he referred to history programmes in the US, examples of which included many voices representing different positions and viewpoints. He described this kind of

programming as offering a 'salad of opinions'. This, he said, left the viewer thinking that they knew exactly what happened. Schama argued that the most compelling history is shamelessly engaged and not objective, and would far rather present his own view and invite people to question and challenge it. Clearly, his view contradicts the way in which audiences are understood to engage with television, and he does not recognize the 'mindful' and 'mindless' distinction suggested by Moscardo's work which relies upon a multiplicity of viewpoints being available to the viewer. He also overlooks the way in which this programme, and others like it, are presented. The aim of the series, its style, aesthetics and high production values as well as the accompanying book and DVD are all packaged as if they are presenting the definitive history of Britain. In addition, Schama's presence as a white, albeit Jewish, male striding around the locations explaining events, situations and identifying causes and consequences is a familiar style of television which, while it pre-dates him, certainly carries an unquestionable authority and legitimacy. As one feminist scholar has written of museums, visitors often 'do not "read" what they see as the selection and interpretation of one person' in part because they have 'no access to alternative material, meanings, and arrangements' (Porter, 1988: 104). This provides a feminist echoing of the earlier assertion by White that emplotment is 'the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind' (1973: 7); in this case, a story which neglects to inform the viewer of alternative interpretations. But in these circumstances, what resources are given to the viewer to facilitate a critical and questioning response to the authoritative and articulate Schama?

In conclusion, we can contrast the two presenter styles in epistemological terms as 'he who knows' (Schama) with 'he who wants to know' (Wood). In the former, knowledge is the property of the expert and can be imparted to the lay person (the viewer). This resonates with notions of bardic television developed by Fiske and Hartley (1978), who suggest that television offers a space for the modern-day equivalents of soothsayers and priests and, we might add, the civic orator and public historian identified by Schama. Wood, in contrast, 'wants to know' and seeks to discover the 'truth' behind legends. While this may be a mere narrative device used to achieve some narrative closure, nevertheless, knowledge is being constructed by putting together a series of clues, the provenance of which includes non-experts offering experiential accounts which are valued as knowledge. In both cases, the differing narratives tell different kinds of stories. The underlying contradiction here is that while Schama's series has entered the annals of classic 'landmark' history television, Wood's series is arguably more intellectually stimulating and offers more 'mindful' pleasure through knowing by understanding, perhaps reflecting the medium's pre-existing and enduring ideas of what makes 'good history'.



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## Notes

1. Obviously this is part of a far wider debate about the ethical implications of relativist historical accounts. For further details see, among others, de Leeuw (2006), Rosenstone (1995), and White (1973, 1987, 1996).
2. Although this seems unlikely, given Nancy Partner's account (1997).
3. See <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/resources/teachers.inst.html> for higher education history teachers in the UK.
4. This can be seen on the DVD *A History of Britain* (BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2002).
5. This can be seen on the DVD case of *A History of Britain* (BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2002).
6. Thirteen weeks conveniently fitted into a quarter of the schedule. See Sir David Attenborough on the making of *Civilisation* on DVD (BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2005).
7. See Wood's Maya Vision International website for further press quotes: <http://www.mayavisionint.com>
8. This can be seen on the DVD of *a History of Britain* (BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2002).
9. This framework resonates with the active/passive figures identified in television audience research by John Fiske (1987).
10. Interview with Simon Schama by Mark Lawson, on the DVD of *A History of Britain*.

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### Biographical notes

Erin Bell is a research fellow at the University of Lincoln, currently working on the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded 'Televising History 1995–2010' project. She is a historian and continues to publish on early modern gender and religious nonconformity. ADDRESS: Faculty of Media and Humanities, University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, Lincoln LN6 7TS, UK. [email: [ebell@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:ebell@lincoln.ac.uk)]

Ann Gray is Reader in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Lincoln. She has published on gender and technology, audience research and research methods and is director of the 'Televising History 1995–2010' project.